THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Spirit

May 31, 1998
John M. Buchanan

Presbyterian worship presumes a high degree of literacy. Even in a small town such as ours. I wondered if many of the people in the Pentecostal church I was visiting would feel welcome there. And as I looked around the room I kept thinking, Kathleen, these are the people Jesus says will be first in the kingdom. And I had a kind of vision of all of us coming together, bearing our different wounds, offering differing gifts. The preachers, prophets, healers. Those who can describe the faith and those who can only live it. Those who write and those who sing. Those who have knowledge and those who are wise only in the sight of God. Each of us poor and in need of love, yet rich in spirit. Each of us speaking in the language we know, and being understood. Pentecost, indeed.

Kathleen Norris
"Pentecostal"
Amazing Grace

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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SPIRIT

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak ... each one heard them speaking..." Acts 2:4,6

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Startle us on this Pentecost Sunday with new truth about ourselves, about you, and about your activity in the world. Break down the barriers we carefully construct around our spirits. Give us the courage of vulnerability and the grace to hear your word for us and to respond with our own love and strength and faith. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

* * *

It's an old joke and you've heard it before but it is so perfect for the story we just heard from the second chapter of Acts, and perfect for this day and, frankly, perfect for us, sitting here in the sanctuary of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. So I'm going to tell it again.

A woman, a fervent member of a Pentecostal church, while in the city on a Sunday morning, found a local church which happened to be Presbyterian. She was greeted, rather formally, she thought, by a very dignified usher who showed her to a pew. She sat down to participate in worship, which being Presbyterian, was proceeding decently and in order. She was a little perplexed by how quiet it was and the passivity of her fellow worshippers, and the formality and what felt like rigidity of the whole experience. When the minister got up to preach, she rather liked what he was saying, so she began to respond, audibly, to the great discomfort of the people around her. "Amen!" "Yes, Lord.... Preach it, brother!" People in the pew in front of her turned around to look; the woman beside her moved a few inches away. Suddenly the usher who seated her appeared at her side. "Ma'am, is there something wrong?" he asked. "Why, no," she said, "there's nothing wrong. I've got the spirit!" To which the usher responded, "Well, you certainly didn't get it here."

Something like that is exactly what happened on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem about seven weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The first people who witnessed the outpouring of the Spirit were urbane, sophisticated. They sneered – "They're drunk, that's all... those foreigners. You know how they drink. It's only nine o'clock in the morning and look at them already."

Preachers generally would prefer to ignore the subject of the Spirit. It sounds so unsophisticated, so irrational, so out of control. The language which describes what happened that day is intentionally lavish and expansive, excessive even.

> "They were all together in one place – suddenly from heaven came the sound of a violent wind – tongues of fire rested on each – they were filled with the Holy Spirit...."

It reminds me a little bit of what happens at the United Center when the Bulls are introduced at game time. The lights go down, laser lights are flashing, the music is loud, the place fills with fireworks and smoke, and as the starting five are introduced, one at a time until you get to the last player, "Number 23 from North Carolina," the place erupts in noise...everyone is standing, clapping in time to the rhythmic thumping of the familiar music, whistling, yelling. And then suddenly the lights come on and everyone looks around a little sheepishly, thinking, "Did I really do that?"

The writer of the account of Pentecost was Luke. Luke chooses elaborate, dramatic images and part of the problem we have with this whole subject of the Holy Spirit and Pentecost is precisely because we are so captivated, or fascinated by, or repelled by, the symbols, the images, that we focus entirely on them and not whatever it was that the writer was trying to convey...a little like thinking that the dramatic introductory ritual at the United Center is the point instead of the game.

The game on Pentecost is what happens next, after the wind and fire...

> "...filled with the Spirit, they began to speak in other languages...."
> ...and, "People from every nation heard them and could understand what they were hearing."

Pentecost is about communication, community.

The writer is careful to call the roll: "Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Asia, Egypt, Libya, Crete, Arabia – all could hear and understand."

God apparently loves diversity – and unity. God loves all kinds of people with particular customs and cultures and unique languages. And, God loves the idea of unity, of those diverse people with all their particularities sharing a unity, a common humanity that allows them to speak and hear one another.

Diversity and unity. It's one of the oldest ideas in the Bible and it is first expressed in one of our oldest and most intriguing stories, the tower of Babel, a complicated story, actually.

God's intent, the Book of Genesis suggests, is for people to scatter and settle throughout the earth: one people, created by God, but diverse in terms of where they live and the cultures they create.

The people, the way the story tells it, do not like the scattering part. They decide to stop wandering around, settle down, build a city, and a high tower. "Come," they say, "let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the whole earth."

God is the pluralist. God wants people to move out and become different. God does not think much, apparently, of the human need and desire for racial and political and social homogeneity. The people do, which ought not to come as a surprise. "Let's stick together, build a city with a wall around it, pass a few restrictive covenants, organize some exclusive clubs, huddle in gated communities, keep 'them' out. Let's invest in our military instead of schools, build nukes instead of developing agriculture. Let's spend our wealth, all of it if necessary, securing ourselves instead of using it to try to figure out how to live together. Let's build another aircraft carrier rather than paying our U.N. dues." The tower symbolizes all of that – military and political security.

God takes a look at the walled city with its tower and says, in effect, "This is not what I meant, this exclusivity and racial purity and cultural sameness." So God does what they have refused to do – scatters them and gives them different languages so they can create different cultures and races and customs and even religions.

The second part of the story, of course, is Pentecost, when the Spirit of God gathers the nations and enables them to communicate, to be a human community because now they can speak and hear and understand.

God is in the business of building community in the midst of diversity. Can you think of a more relevant or urgent matter before the world? It's what God is up to in the world. Building community is the work of the Spirit. Or, put another way, whenever community emerges out of diversity, it is evidence of the Spirit's activity.

A new community is trying to emerge slowly but surely in Northern Ireland. For decades, for centuries actually, two distinct communities, each with a culture, a language, a religion – Roman Catholic Irish and Protestant British, have been at war, each wanting the other simply to go away; the Ireland sympathizers hoping the Protestant British would go back to England or Scotland, the British loyalists wanting the Irish sympathizers to go back over the border into Ireland. And it seemed like there would never be a resolution.

But now, finally, comes an attempt to affirm both communities and respect diversity, and miraculously, the vast majority of people in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, Irish and British, have voted to give it a chance and to allow a new community to emerge. I think it is a modern Pentecost.

Unity in diversity. Is there a more urgent matter before us?

The Latin motto on the Great Seal of the United States, since 1776, has read: "*E Pluribus Unum*," ... "one from many." The preamble to the United States Constitution states it plainly. "To form a more perfect union." In a recent book, *The One and the Many*, Martin Marty argues that the oneness, the unity, the community of the nation is threatened by a new tribalism, a turning of backs away from the larger community and focusing exclusively on my family, my race, my religion, my kind of people. Marty describes the paradox: "The more global our science and technology, the more tribal our politics; the more universal our system of communications, the

less we know what to communicate: the more it becomes apparent that human beings cannot decently survive with their separateness, the more separate they become...the human society is splitting itself into smaller and smaller fragments." [p. 13]

What is to be done about the fracturing of the human community? University of Chicago professor Jean Bethke Elshtain thinks this issue is one of survival for our nation. In her fine book, *Democracy on Trial*, she argues that it is time to balance our obsession with individual rights and entitlements with an equal number of community responsibilities. Elshtain calls for a new social covenant constructed around concerns all people share – for safe streets and neighborhoods, for instance.

Elshtain interviewed mothers and grandmothers, white and black, rich and poor and discovered unanimity: "more police patrols, more neighborhood power, less freedom for armed teenagers to run amok, and tougher penalties for repeat offenders." [p. 31]

She cites an article written by Mike Barnicle, a columnist for *The Boston Globe*, who told the story of a 31 year-old mother of three who pled with police to deal with kids dealing guns and drugs daily in front of her home. The guns, of course, are readily available because the NRA successfully lobbies lawmakers in the name of the constitutional right to bear arms.

But, says Barnicle, in the process of protecting that individual right, which, by the way, most constitutional scholars know has absolutely nothing to do with the opportunity to buy a military style assault rifle, or a street sweeper shotgun, we have been willing to sacrifice community rights. "The right of a young black mother and her three children to sit on a stoop or play at a playground. The right to walk to the store at any reasonable time without the fear of getting caught in a crossfire. The right to use a swing set when the whim strikes."

How many school children will have to die before we change our minds about the individual's right to purchase a gun without reasonable community regulation? How many innocent youngsters are going to have to die before the community has the courage to say no, it is not correct that "guns don't kill, people kill." Guns in the hands of disturbed, angry children kill -- other children – sometimes their parents. How many children must die before the community asserts the right to regulate weapons that kill with at least as much common sense and care and caution as we regulate the operation of an automobile?

The issues that divide us are many and complex. But we are all in this together, Professor Elshtain reminds us. We are diverse and there is no way ultimately to get away from each other. And on Pentecost people of faith are reminded that God's will and intent is for a oneness, a unity, a community to be forged out of diversity.

The story of Pentecost is a reminder that God is actively present in the life of the world: that what Christians mean by "Holy Spirit" is God's energy, God's love, God's grace actively engaging people and institutions, actively transforming people and institutions. Pentecost is a reminder that we are not alone, in fact we are not the only ones who care about the human community, that we are not the only ones working for the safe and healthy future for our children

and grandchildren. Pentecost is a reminder that we are not always in control of the agenda, and that God continues to come into life in unexpected and sometimes unreasonable ways, sometimes into your life and mine. That wherever we experience the impulse to live more, to love more, to experience more beauty and passion and commitment, it is God's Spirit in our lives. And whenever we experience the impulse to change who we are, to open our closed spirits to God's Spirit, to see new truth, new beauty, to become new men and women, it is the activity of the Holy Spirit.

In the motion picture *The Apostle*, Robert Duvall portrays Sonny Dewey, a Pentecostal preacher. Sonny Dewey, passionate about obeying God's will, absolutely convinced of the Spirit's immediacy and activity in his life, is also flawed to the core. He admits he's "friendly with the ladies," has to flee from the law as his marriage breaks up and his congregation fires him. So he heads into the wilderness, re-baptizes himself, settles in a new town and starts to build a church, a Pentecostal church.

Duvall's portrayal is full of integrity. It's not a style of religion with which I am comfortable, but it does build community and it is radically inclusive and compelling.

And it portrays the work of God's Spirit, the life-changing personal experience of conversion with great sensitivity, a topic we Presbyterians don't talk about much.

"A mean-spirited racist, armed with a bulldozer, is determined to destroy Sonny's new church. When confronted by the apostle, who places his Bible in front of the bulldozer, the man climbs down from his machine and after a few quiet words with the apostle, drops to his knees, confesses that he came not to destroy church but to find a way toward conversion.

He whispers to the apostle that he's embarrassed by what is happening to him. The apostle is reassuring, "It's OK to cry. I will cry with you." In the background, the congregation, white and black, old and young, begins to sing. It is a stunning moment." [see James Wall, *The Christian Century*, January 7-14, 1998]

Pentecost reminds us that we are not alone: that God acts in the world, that God acts in your life and mine to create community, to bring peace, to give life – in ways that we cannot always understand or even describe to others. So, finally, all there is to do is give things to the mysteriously loving and gracious God whose Spirit continues to surprise us, startles us even.

There is a lovely old American folk hymn that says it beautifully…

> "The lone wild bird in lofty flight
> is still with thee, nor leaves thy sight.
> The ends of earth are in thy hand,
> The sea's dark deep and far-off land.
> And I am thine. I rest in thee,
> Great Spirit Come, and rest in me."

Amen.